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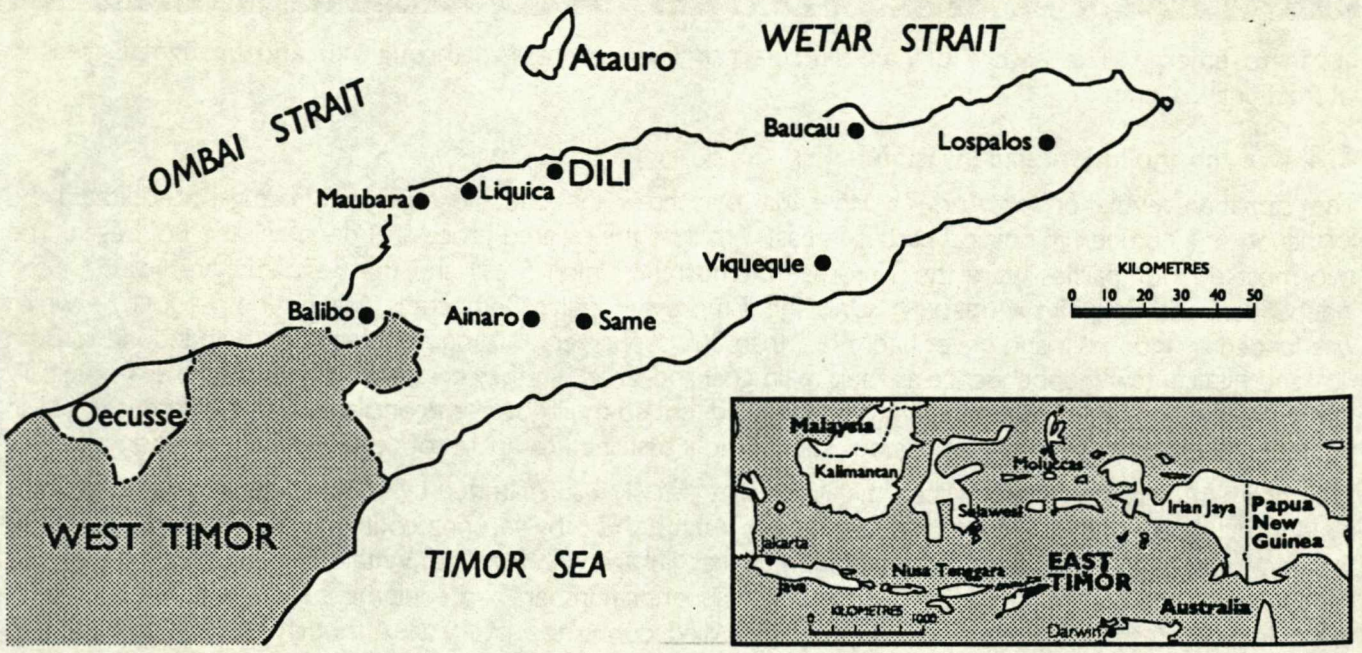
East Timor – the basic facts

BCET
British Coalition for East Timor



Timor is the most easterly of the Nusa Tenggara in the Indonesian archipelago, and lies just 300 miles northwest of Darwin in Australia. East Timor comprises the more mountainous eastern half of the island, the enclave of Oecusse in the western half, and Atauro, a small island to the north of Dili, East Timor's capital and main port. West Timor is a former Dutch colony and became part of Indonesia when it gained its independence in 1945. However, the division of the island predates colonial times when the island was split into two kingdoms. Although many speak Bahasa Indonesia, East Timorese prefer to speak Tetum, Portuguese, or another of more than 30 ethnic languages. Catholicism is wide-spread but the old animist traditions persist.

The colonial past

Portuguese navigators arrived on Timor in the 16th century. Like the Chinese and traders from the west of the archipelago before them, the Portuguese found the island a plentiful source of sandalwood. During the next two centuries Portuguese influence was limited to missionary activities and it was not until early in the 18th century that a seat of government was established. Shortly afterwards, in the face of conflict over control of the sandalwood trade with the Dutch, the Portuguese withdrew to the eastern half of Timor. Until the end of the 19th century, Portuguese authority was never very strong – their control was often effectively opposed by the *liurai*, the native Timorese rulers. Dominican missionaries were also involved in revolts and opposition to the government.

Finally, a series of bloody rebellions between 1894 and 1912 led to a conclusive 'pacification'. The sandalwood trade had already declined, and as Portugal fell into a depression after WW1 East Timor drifted into economic torpor and neglect, notable only for its modest production of high-quality coffee and as a distant place to send political exiles.

During WW2 20,000 Japanese troops occupied East Timor, despite Portugal's neutrality. Several hundred Australian soldiers carried out a guerilla war, killing 1,500 and tying down the rest of the Japanese forces. This success was only possible with the support of the East Timorese for whom the cost was extremely harsh. The Japanese razed whole villages, seized food supplies and executed Timorese in areas where the Australians were operating. Farms were abandoned in the war zones, resulting in starvation. Added to those killed in Allied bombing raids to recapture the island, more than 40,000 East Timorese died before the end of the war.

Portugal resumed control after the war despite the global trend to decolonisation. The overwhelming feature of Portuguese rule was neglect – there were virtually no health or education facilities and few roads outside Dili. However postwar East Timor experienced an improvement in its economy and relative stability, except for a swiftly put down rebellion in 1959, and during the 1960s a small educated élite with nationalist aspirations

> The independence of every country is the right of every nation, with no exception for the people of Timor... Whoever will govern in Timor in the future after independence can be assured that the Government of Indonesia will always strive to maintain good relations, friendship and co-operation for the benefit of both countries.
>
> *Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik, 17 June 1974*

began to emerge. The nature of colonial rule remained repressive throughout and brought increased international criticism.

Civil war and the Indonesian invasion

The 'carnation revolution' on April 25 1974 that overthrew the Caetano regime in Portugal precipitated the formation of a number of political parties in East Timor as the belated process of decolonisation of began. The two most popular parties were the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) and the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor (FRETILIN). Only the Timorese Popular Democratic Association (APODETI) – which was funded by Indonesia and never had more than 300 supporters – favoured integration with Indonesia. Both UDT and FRETILIN saw independence as their main goal and, although they envisaged different time scales, initially formed a coalition. The coalition eventually collapsed, not so much over irreconcilable policy differences, but in the face of Portugal's weak and ambiguous stance and a sustained campaign of destabilisation by Indonesia.

Concerned by rumours propagated by Jakarta that FRETILIN was infiltrated by communists and was planning a coup, UDT leaders staged a 'counter-coup' in early August 1975 by securing control of key installations, stating that they wanted independence but in addition to that, linkage with Portugal. Within days counter measures by FRETILIN led to the outbreak of bitter fighting. With superior numbers and equipment FRETILIN gained control of the colony in just over three weeks. Upto 3,000 died during the civil war. Although FRETILIN continued to recognise Portuguese sovereignty, Portugal's refusal to carry on the process of decolonisation made FRETILIN the de facto government.

Indonesia meanwhile carried out military manoeuvres across the border from West Timor which were met with fierce resistance. Although the Indonesian foreign minister, Adam Malik, made a written assurance that Indonesia had no claim on the territory and would stand by East Timor's right to self-determination, his government was preparing for a take-over. Worries about the possible adverse international reaction to integration had been assuaged by the positive encouragement of some Portuguese MPs and Gough Whitlam, the Australian Prime Minister. In order to maintain the lie that the civil war was still raging, that FRETILIN were responsible for mounting atrocities and that thousands of refugees were fleeing to West Timor, Indonesian troops murdered five Australian television journalists at Balibo. Western governments through their intelligence networks knew the true situation and understood fully what was about to happen. On November 28, in an effort to attract international support as invasion loomed, FRETILIN unilaterally declared independence and proclaimed the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

On 7 December 1975 Indonesia launched an attack by sea and by air on the capital Dili. Hundreds of Timorese and Chinese were gunned down at random in the streets in addition to a number of public executions. Substantial reinforcements quelled the fierce resistance in Dili. On 25 and 26 December landings were made at Liquica and Maubara which led to further mass killings of the population. In February 1976, East Timor's Indonesian appointed Vice-Governor admitted that 60,000 Timorese had been killed since the invasion. As a result of these and ensuing atrocities, entire towns and neighbouring villages abandoned their homes to move to safe areas behind FRETILIN lines. Perhaps as many as half a million people were displaced in the turmoil. By April 1976 there were 32,000 Indonesian troops in East Timor, with another 10,000 in West Timor. On 31 May the Indonesian military convened a 'People's Assembly' – the 28 delegates of this unelected body approved a petition calling for integration. On 17 July President Suharto signed a bill integrating East Timor as Indonesia's 27th province.

War and resistance

Despite their vastly superior resources, in these early months the Indonesian forces suffered high casualties and only gained control of the coastal and border areas. Indonesia's acquisition after 1977 of counter-insurgency aircraft was the lynchpin of its campaign of encirclement and annihilation. The US Government supplied the most important aircraft (OV10-Broncos, F5s and A4s) as well as transport planes, armoured cars and a huge

The United States wished things to turn out as they did in East Timor and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success.
UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan

quantity of rifles, machine-guns and communications equipment. Indonesia also bought Sabres from Malaysia, Alouette helicopters from France and Hawk trainer-fighters from the UK. Mountain areas where the population had fled were bombed intensively, preventing the people from growing food to support themselves. Famine compounded the effects of injury, disease and displacement. In 1978 and 1979 thousands of East Timorese left the mountains. Whole communities were forcibly split up and moved to 'strategic villages'. The situation was compared with Biafra during the Nigerian civil war by relief workers who were allowed to take part in the limited relief operation. 200,000 out of an initial population of 700,000 were estimated to have died.

By 1979 Indonesia had gained control over the whole country and believed that FRETILIN had been defeated – almost the entire leadership had been killed or captured. In the east though a handful of guerrillas had survived and regrouped under the leadership of Xanana Gusmao. In 1980 resistance was recommenced with smaller units fighting a classical defensive guerrilla war. Without any external material support, Falintil survived renewed military operations against them in 1981, 1983-1984, 1986-1987, 1988 and 1990, and successfully forged links with people in the strategic settlements as well as in Dili and other towns.

Despite a ceasefire in 1983 when the military commander met Xanana Gusmao, the Indonesian military applied unyielding repression. They conscripted civilians to walk in front of advancing troops in so-called 'fence of legs' operations to flush out the guerrillas. Surveillance was intense and those suspected of aiding the resistance received brutal treatment. Those who surrendered were frequently executed on the spot and on several occasions hundreds of civilians were massacred in cold blood. Numerous cases of murder, 'disappearance', rape and political imprisonment have been documented.

East Timor's social fabric was further damaged by the resettlement of upto 90% of the population to break the kinship ties on which resistance networks depended. Only 20% of villages now occupy ancestral sites. The new villages were built away from people's original homes and near roads or intersections, fenced off and guarded by troops. Restrictions on movement were so stringent that only the land around the villages could be farmed – the land was soon overfarmed and famine became widespread. In addition to resettlement, thousands of Indonesian transmigrants have been settled on land from which the East Timorese were driven. In all, about 100,000 Indonesian migrants have been moved in, working in offices, commerce and running the markets – the intention being to dilute the indigenous population. The Timorese are required to participate in a family planning programme financed by the World Bank. Furthermore the civilian administration was filled with army personnel, key sectors of the economy were managed by corruption-ridden military monopolies and Timorese were excluded from many employment opportunities.

East Timor was kept isolated from the rest of the world and those visits which did occur were heavily staged. The tenacity of Timorese resistance led to a vicious circle of escalating military force of genocidal proportions and hardening popular opposition. In the face of the barrenness of these attempts at pacification and world protest at East Timor's isolation, the Indonesian authorities were forced to open up the territory to the outside world. Tourists were allowed in and journalists no longer required special permits to visit.

Western powers and the UN position

On 22 December 1975, eight days after the Indonesian invasion, the United Nations Security Council unanimously called on *'the Government of Indonesia to withdraw without delay all its forces from the Territory.'* The resolution called on *'all States to respect the territorial integrity of East Timor as well as the inalienable right of its people to self-determination in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV)'*. In defiance of the UN resolution, the Indonesian foreign minister denied that there were any troops to withdraw, and that anti-FRETILIN forces were being supported by volunteers. The only positive effort at UN intervention was an attempt to send an envoy in February 1976 which was effectively sabotaged by Australia.

Until 1982 the General Assembly adopted annual resolutions on East Timor sponsored by the five former Portuguese colonies in Africa and Portugal. The US abstained in 1975 and has consistently voted against since 1976. Australia, the first western country to give *de facto* and then *de jure* recognition to Indonesia's annexation,

> I would agree to the territory being placed under a UN administration as the first step towards seeking a final solution. I have already stated and will repeat that I am interested in discussing any plan for a solution under the supervision of the UN and under conditions of a ceasefire.
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> *Xanana Gusmao, interviewed by Robert Domm, 27 September 1990*

voted for East Timor in 1975, abstained in 1976 and 1977, and has voted against ever since. With few exceptions, West European countries, including the UK, have abstained. Most western and former eastern bloc countries have not been prepared to risk damaging economic relations with Indonesia by supporting the principle of self-determination for East Timor. By 1982, Resolution 37/30 was adopted by 50 votes to 46 which instructed the Secretary General to initiate consultations with all parties directly concerned.

Nevertheless only Portugal and Indonesia have been consulted. Former UN Secretary General Peres de Cuellar ignored demands for representatives of the East Timorese people to be consulted, and informed the General Assembly annually that consultations were continuing. In fact they were dead-locked – Indonesia refused to allow the issue of self-determination to be raised and while Portugal feared a breakdown in the talks no other country took the initiative to save the issue from sinking into a quagmire of inaction. Consequently no further resolutions have been tabled and the General Assembly has been effectively silenced.

However East Timor was far from insignificant. To the north of the island lie the deep channels of the Ombar-Wetai straits which were of vital strategic importance to the US, to the south lies Timor Gap, an area of sea-bed between Timor and Australia where huge reserves of oil had been discovered. In 1978 Australia gave *de jure* recognition to the integration as a preliminary to finalising a sea-bed accord. The pragmatic position of Australia and the US was crucial in influencing western attitudes and contributed substantially to the UN's lack of political will. Moreover the US pressurised some countries to change their vote, such as the small pacific island of Vanuatu which was threatened with loss of aid. At the same time, western nations and the World Bank poured ever larger aid into Indonesia. By 1991, this aid had reached $4.75 billion.

Amnesty International and Asia Watch, despite being refused permission to visit, have regularly published reports documenting human rights abuses in East Timor. The UN Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of minorities, composed of independent experts, has adopted several resolutions condemning the situation. Unfortunately, its parent body, the UN Human Rights Commission, composed of state missions, lacked the political will to act on those recommendations. In 1990 Indonesia was elected onto the Commission.

The Santa Cruz massacre

The slight opening of East Timor allowed the urban resistance to adopt more open political tactics. Though the Pope's visit in October 1989 was intended to show that East Timor was no longer a security problem and that the population accepted integration, the Papal Mass ended with a pro-independence demonstration which made headlines in the world press. Two further demonstrations in January and September 1990 resulted in clashes between students and troops. Unarmed resistance came to play a prominent role, collaborating with the armed resistance – such was the organisation of the clandestine movement that Robert Domm, an Australian lawyer, succeeded in breaching Indonesian security to meet and interview Xanana.

After 1985 the consultations between Portugal and Indonesia had concentrated on negotiating the terms for a visit to East Timor by a group of Portuguese MPs, and although diplomatic disagreements kept the two sides apart, a visit was finally arranged for the beginning of November 1991. The Timorese began preparing to use the visit to show their opposition which led to increased repression and death threats to stop people talking to the Portuguese. Shortly before the delegation was to leave, the visit was indefinitely postponed, supposedly over Indonesian objections to the inclusion of an Australian journalist. On 12 November, after a mass for a pro-independence activist, demonstrators marched through the streets of Dili to the Santa Cruz cemetery. Indonesian troops deliberately fired upon the crowd – between 75 and 200 people were killed. Film of the massacre, witnessed by several foreign journalists, was widely shown and resulted in public outcry throughout the western world.

The Indonesian authorities attempted to portray the killings as an isolated incident and place the blame on unemployed hooligans. Nevertheless western countries condemned the massacre and brought sufficient pressure on the Indonesian government to take the unprecedented steps of setting up a commission of inquiry

> When these people are taken to prison, the first thing they do is beat them up. I have received letters from prisoners and ex-prisoners telling me about all types of torture, electric shocks, burning of genitals with cigarettes, placing people in barrels of cold water, and whipping until they say they are FRETILIN collaborators.
>
> *Bishop Belo, 11 February 1993*

and courtmartialling several soldiers. None though have actually altered their official position over East Timor. On 19 December Australia and Indonesia signed the final treaty for oil production in Timor Gap. In February 1992 Britain sold a supply ship to the Indonesian Navy; British Aerospace is currently finalising a deal for 48 Hawk jets. Other arms sales continue unabated. In March, the UN Human Rights Commission stopped short of a resolution condemning the massacre and congratulated the Indonesian government for the measures it has taken. Despite rejecting Dutch aid because of Holland's temporary suspension of future aid and a prospective linkage of aid to human rights, Indonesia received a record amount of aid ($5 billion).

International outrage after the Santa Cruz killings forced Suharto to show 'even-handedness' by putting both Timorese and Indonesian military on trial. In reality Timorese who peacefully demonstrated in Jakarta have received sentences of 9 and 10 years while Indonesian soldiers who fired on defenceless crowds received just a few months. Those tried in Dili received even stiffer sentences upto 15 years and life. The bodies of those murdered in the massacre have still not been returned to the bereaved families. East Timor, despite official denials, was been closed again and harsh military rule reintroduced. There were reports of summary executions in the aftermath of the massacre.

UN talks and the capture of Xanana

In the light of the Santa Cruz massacre and the United Nation's increasing role in resolving conflicts around the world, it was difficult to ignore the illegality of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor. Preliminary negotiations between Indonesia and Portugal laid the ground for full talks at the UN in New York starting on 17 December 1992 which were to pave the way for East Timorese participation in 'proximity talks'. Secretary General Boutros-Ghali was thought to be moving towards consulting Timorese leaders, especially Xanana Gusmao and Bishop Belo, the leader of the East Timorese Catholic Church.

However, before the New York talks took place, Xanana Gusmao was captured by the Indonesian security forces on 20 November in a Dili suburb. Subsequently several members of his family and friends with whom he had been staying were also arrested. Clandestine organisations were forced to publicly disband, and the military falsely claimed that many of the resistance had surrendered. Xanana himself was paraded on television in a series of interviews in which he renounced his struggle for independence and asserted that East Timor was part of Indonesia. This apparent change of heart was so abrupt that many observers, including Bishop Belo, felt that it was evidence of coercion and/or torture. Despite international calls for Xanana's release, he was charged with 'rebellion, conspiracy and trying to set up a separate state' and also with 'illegal possession of a firearm'. The former is punishable by upto life imprisonment, the latter by death. His trial began in February 1993.

Although the Timorese resistance is more than Xanana alone, his capture was definitely a setback. The New York talks were unfruitful, yielding nothing more than an agreement to meet again in Rome this April. The Indonesian line was once more that there was nothing to discuss, since the East Timorese had expressed their desire to become Indonesians by the vote of the 'People's Assembly'. Although the Secretary General is believed to be sympathetic to the plight of the East Timorese, he has kept his criticisms of Indonesia private – severely critical reports, such as that of Special Rapporteur Amos Wako, who visited East Timor in February 1992 have still not been published. In these circumstances, talks between the Portuguese and Indonesians may well come to yet another stand-still.

Arrests, torture, killings and disappearances are commonplace again. Until the East Timorese are allowed to make a meaningful choice of self-determination, there can be no internationally acceptable solution to the problem of East Timor.

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